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August 14, 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subjects: (1) Berlin Negotiations and (2) Possible Reprisals

(1) Negotiations

I find unanimity in your immediate staff for the view that we should take a clear initiative for negotiation within the next week or ten days -- safely before the Neutral Nations Conference. Since our allies are hesitant, the lead will have to come from you, at the highest level.

This opinion is strengthened by the border-closing episode, which can be described as one reason more for calling talks -- because of the dangerous and explosive weakness it reveals in the DDR.

I hope you can discuss this general question with Secretary Rusk this afternoon. His professionals are more cautious, being committed to a 4-Power process of planning. They see some virtue in the French argument that we ought not to talk about negotiation before we have reached agreement on the substance of our position. But the truth is that we're making very slow headway toward a clear position, as it is; a date for negotiation would put all our noses to the grindstone.

(2) Reprisals for the Border Closing

The Department's proposal for a riposte is likely to be the ending of the travel permits which have been issued by the three powers in West Berlin to East Germans who want to visit allied or neutral countries. This was used a year ago in response to East German harassment of civilian traffic, and it worked well. No one thinks it will cause a reversal of policy this time, in the light of the much more serious causes of this much larger action. But it is argued

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that it will give some pain, since it will cut off East German access to allied countries and to those neutral nations which play along.

I find this argument unconvincing. I doubt if we should take little actions in reprisal against this big one, especially when the punishment is unrelated to the crime. The only good argument for this action is that it has been discussed among the 4 Powers before as a possible resort to border-closing, and there may be some Allied worry about our "reliability" if we don't support it now.

Incidentally, I find agreement in both Joe Alsop and George Kennan to these three conclusions: (1) this is something they have always had the power to do; (2) it is something they were bound to do sooner or later, unless they could control the exits from West Berlin to the West; (3) since it was bound to happen, it is as well to have it happen early, as their doing and their responsibility.

McG. B.

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